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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to critically assess the developmental conditions of 187 children (ages 1 month to 6 years) in eight creches (day nurseries) located in and around Ribeirao Preto, Brazil. Data were collected through informal interviews of day care staff and from 20 hours of direct observations of day care units. Findings indicated inadequate physical structures, lack of structured activities, untrained staff, and poor caretaker/child ratios. Six creches had poorly qualified and underpaid teachers who supervised organized "school-like" activities for the older groups. Language development seemed inhibited in younger children, but older children were more verbal. Nutritional data indicated a significant excess of children with low height for age, a fact suggesting past malnutrition. Physical and mental development data were incomplete, but there were no apparent behavioral disturbances in spite of deprived conditions. It was emphasized that children learned to be passive, obedient, and helpless and had greater chances of developing negative self-concepts. (BJD)

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QUALITY OF CARE IN CRÈCHES FOR DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN
A BRAZILIAN CASE STUDY

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

There are around 24 million Brazilian children under five years of age.

Most of them come from families who live under a poverty line established by the capacity of the family to obtain the montly food basket essential for its survival. According to UNICEF/CEPAL there were nearly 50% Brazilian families under that line in 1979 and that proportion has probably increased during the last few years.

Daycare and preschool facilities are being increasingly demanded by mothers, often the only adult in the family, who are obliged to go to work to guarantee the mere survival of the children. This situation is more prevalent among migrant populations who have lost their social and family network of support on which they could rely for help with the children.

There are no effective governmental policies to provide protection, care and education to those children, although they are often proposed as means for breaking the deprivation cycle by providing an adequate diet and better psychoeducational conditions for poor 0-6 years old children.

In fact daycare and preschool facilities are available to less than 0.5% of the under 3 years old children and around 5% of the 4-6 years olds.

The present study has a action-oriented approach, and aims at:

(1) - to make a critical assessment of the developmental conditions faced by children in a group of 8 crēches located in and around Ribeirão Preto.

(2) - to help to improve those conditions by providing the staff with technical assistance given with an action-research approach.

(3) - to contribute for the public discussion of this problem and for the development of more adequate social policies regarding substitute care for disadvantaged children.

Only the first aspect will be presented and discussed in this poster.

METHODS

Data was collected through informal and semi-structured interviews with various people working at the crēches and participant observations by members of the research team. Further controlled data on caretakers activities, frequency and type of caretaker-child interactions have been gathered by means of a 20 hours direct observation in each daycare unit. These data were collected using time sampling techniques and a modified version of a method developed by Kings, Raynes & Tizard (1971).

Repeated measures of the nutritional status (height and weight) and behavioural development (Bayley Scales of Infant Development) of a sample of the daycare children are also being gathered, aiming at a longitudinal analysis of the effects of the care provided by the crēches.

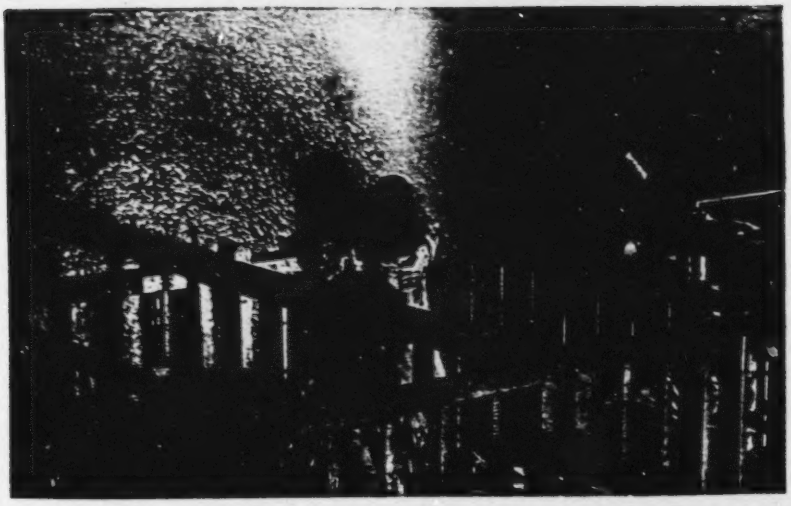
RESULTS

Most crēches are private institutions precariously supported by religious and philantropic groups in which prevails a pathronizing attitude towards the children and their families. They are highly representative of those that serve the low SES population of this region. living in urban poverty.

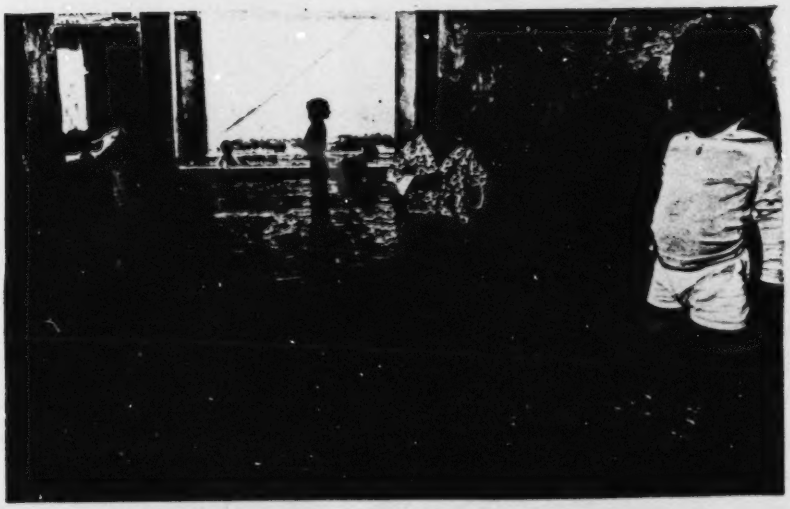
The mothers work either as housemaids or as migrant workers during the harvesting of sugar cane. Most staff come from the same population. The management board belongs to the upper strata of the society who look at the families as being unable to care for their children.

The physical structure of the crēches is usually quite inadequate in terms of internal and external space and of objects for the children to explore, with precarious sanitary conditions.

The median number of children enrolled in each crēche is: 90 (range 40-200).



The children are often left wandering in that empty and unstimulating environment with very little to do.



A small untrained and underpaid staff has to care for a large number of children. Each caretaker has to attend to all the children's needs and to keep the room reasonably tidy and clean.

Their training and working conditions are shown below.

Sex : 100% females

Schooling : 47% under 4 years, with none over 8 years of schooling.

Previous work : 67% housemaids.

Training : 100% did not receive any training for the job.

Salary : 50% less than 30 USS Dollars/month
50% between 30-60 USS Dollars. The regional minimum salary is 60 USS Dollars.

Working Period : 10 hours per day, 5 days per week.

Children from one month to six years old are usually divided in same age groups, although this division varies from crēche to crēche.

The caretaker-child ratios are extremely low.

THE CARETAKER-CHILD RATIOS* ARE EXTREMELY LOW

ACTIVITIES	< 3 YEARS OLD		> 3 YEARS OLD	
	Median	Range	Median	Range
FEEDING	1:12	(1:9 - 1:20)	1:17	(1:11 - 1:42)
Bathing-Changing	1:11	(1:8 - 1:13)	1:23	(1:15 - 1:30)
SLEEP	1:19	(1:10 - 1:35)	1:44	(1:32 - 1:70)
Teaching-playing	1:15	(1:10 - 1:21)	1:25	(1:15 - 1:43)

* These ratios were obtained through the interviews. They tend to increase a bit when the observational data is considered, chiefly in bathing, when 1-4 children are bathed while the others wait.

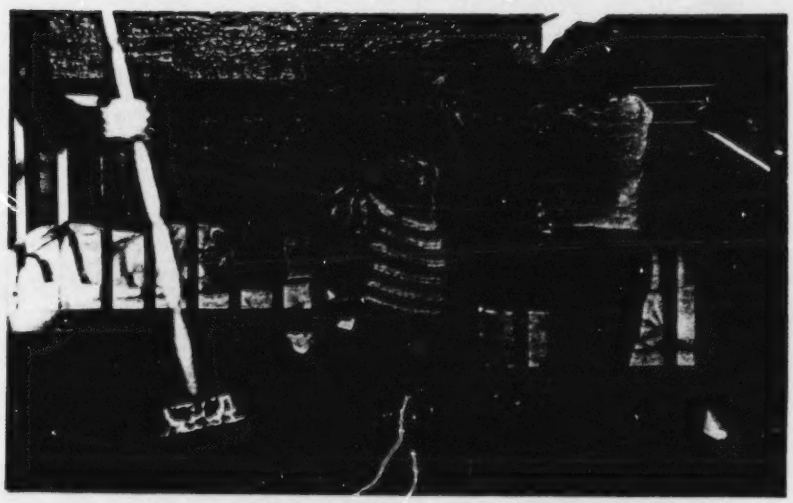
These low ratios allow very little individual care and induce poor interactional environments. There is a clear contrast between the rapid and automatic working rhythm of the caretakers and the slow rhythm of the children, passively waiting for their turn.

Some caretakers showed great capacity to cope successfully with a large number of children, involving all of them in some activity. They usually refer, however, a feeling of helplessness and irritation, with various physical complaints and high absenteeism.

In terms of routine, most of their time is spent either providing physical care, chiefly for the younger group (39%), or supervising the older children (44%). Teaching or playing with children was recorded in less than 6% of the time.

Physical contact was only observed when required by the activity being performed, as in bathing or changing under 3 years old children. Affectionate contacts werevery rare, being recorded in less than 3% of the time units observed.

In most crēches there was no physical contact during feeding. The babies hold their bottles by themselves from very early on, or the bottles are prop up on the crib's side.



Physical care is usually provided in a silent environment. Near all verbalizations are iniatiated by the adult and do not require any reply from the child. Over 60% of them are commands or seeking the child's attention.

Six crēches have part time or full time poorly qualified and underpaid teachers who either supervise the children or organize some activity for the older groups. Those activities are usually school-like ones. The children sit and work around tables.

The frequency of "teacher speak to child" was higher than that recorded for the caretakers. In most occasions (nearly 100%) the teacher was either structuring the children's activity or controlling their behavioural, with no dialogue being established.

The evaluations of the behaviuoral development of a sample of 52 children of two crēches, whose age varied from 7 months to 2 years and 5 months did not indicate higher deficits than those usually described for the low SES population.

They attained a mean score of 87.3 (S.D.15) on Bayley's Mental Scale, and 95.2 (S.D.18) on the Motor Scale, taking the original North-American sample as a standard.

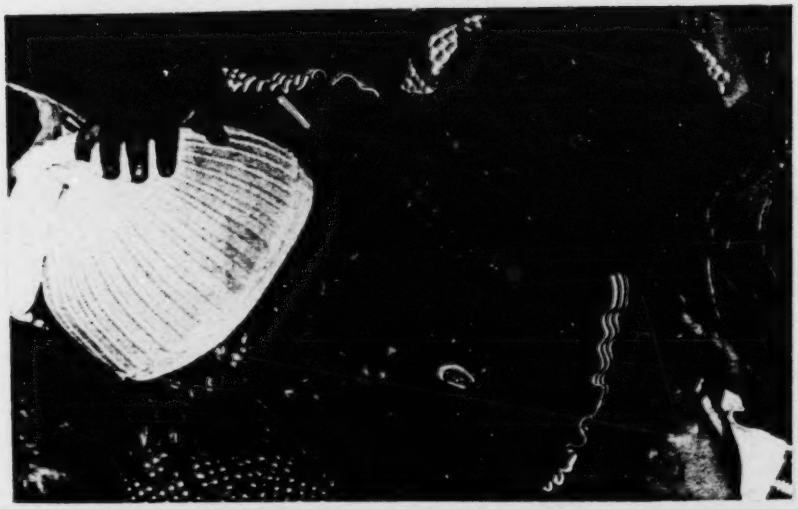
The children failed more on items which required verbal responses (72% of errors) than in non-verbal items (44% of errors). Language development seems to be inhibited in the younger group of children who very seldom presented any verbal behaviour. Older children spoke more and seemed to have a catch up in verbal development.

From the point of view of nutrition, our preliminary data on 187 subjects show a significant excess of children with low height for age which suggests past chronic malnutrition in most of them. Their present nutritional status appears to be generally adequate, although there is some indication of malnutrition in a small proportion of them.

Although our information about the children's physical and mental development is incomplete (longitudinal data are still being collected), we have an impression that these children do not show major delays or behavioural disturbances in despite of the very depriving condition observed.

Therefore, we suggest and intend to investigate if peer interaction does not constitute a facultative developmental switch (Bateson, 1981) for those children who face very poor adult-child interactional environments.

Peer interaction appears to be very frequent and to occur at younger ages than expected in the literature, as suggested below.



Albeit providing arguments for the human organism plasticity to cope with adverse developmental conditions, we would like to emphasize that in the described environments the children learn to be passive, obedient and helpless with greater chances to develop a negative self-concept.

Those conditions help to strengthen the cycle of deprivation in which the children already live.

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